

Stock Responses to Disorder?

Rowland Atkinson and John Flint look at the changing landscape of social housing governance and crime.

Public sector housing has been synonymous with a range of demeaning and inaccurate representations. Public housing has predominated in the public consciousness as the key site of most crime and imagined location of possible victimisation. Students of housing policy quickly learn that it was not always so. Social housing had comprised households of a range of incomes and social backgrounds. This persists yet, increasingly, since the Thatcher government enabled tenants to buy their council property, social housing and the wider housing market involve complicated processes that have a tendency to concentrate the worst-off. Hence, crime risk factors associated with public housing areas have come to dominate the public imagination and policy responses to disorder.

The 1998 *British Crime Survey* provides a breakdown of victimisation by area type and housing tenure. This shows that 8.1% of council estate areas have been victimised once or more compared with 3.4% in rural areas (though the difference is lower when compared with 'inner city' areas where the figure rises to 8.5%). You are twice as likely to be a victim of burglary if you rent from a council or housing association (9.9%) than if you own your own home (4.9%). These dispassionate figures are amplified by looking at levels of fear of crime where we find that inner city and social rented areas are sites of extreme fearfulness about victimisation and exposure to risks.

We can identify three key factors linking social housing and crime. These consist of the governance of social housing, the social composition of its population and a wider range of environmental factors. These factors are highly inter-related, which makes tracing causal pathways from social housing to crime all the more difficult.

The governance of housing

In the last ten years there has been a transformation in the governance of social housing reserved for the poorest sections of society. Between 1981 and 2002 housing associations increased their size from 2.2% to 6.6% of total national stock while local authorities diminished their role from 29% to 14%. However, hand in hand with a dwindling overall stock, due to the 'right to buy', has come reduced public investment so that while in 1980/81 £5.6bn was spent on social housing, now the figure is only £4.7bn in real terms making housing very much the poor man of the welfare state.

These changes have impacted on the abilities of landlords to manage and maintain social rented areas.

Many housing practitioners viewed this impairment of a neighbourhood care-taking role to patterns of environmental decline, low-level crime, low residential satisfaction and fear of crime fuelled by high rates of population turnover. Nevertheless, ownership and management continue to be important because they express a wider process of informal engagement that contributes to the quality of the neighbourhood environment and the prominence of messages that someone cares.

Social housing and particular estates are increasingly defined as one of 'last resort' for individuals with least choice in the housing market. This stigmatisation and social 'residualisation' of the population of social housing has meant that social renters are increasingly those with least resources. Social housing areas increasingly comprise a polarised tenant population of the young, those with children and the elderly. This problematic social mix has often resulted in 'lifestyle' disputes with high levels of reported anti-social behaviour and disorder.

Concentration of problems

This is reinforced by the decline in stock size, resulting in the increasing spatial concentration of social problems within social housing areas. For example, individuals requiring care support in the community are disproportionately represented in this tenure. Sex offenders are also likely to be re-housed in areas of social housing after leaving custodial sentences, putting further strain on local agencies and community relations. Housing management interventions are playing an increasing role in governing these problems, reflected in the growing legal powers and responsibilities of social landlords. Social housing allocation policies have historically contributed to this spatial concentration of vulnerable households, but now often aim at building more socially diverse communities that are considered to be more sustainable by offering increasing choice through lettings policies.

Much policy discourse surrounding disorder in social housing areas is influenced by theories of the underclass. These assume that these poor populations exhibit deficient moral behaviour at both individual and community levels, that their culture is rooted in a dependency on welfare, they are irresponsible, engage in anti-social behaviour or are tolerant of social deviance. Policy responses have included providing social landlords with increased powers of intervention, including new grounds and processes for evictions, interdicts and anti-social behaviour orders, as well as continuing debates about whether



receipt of housing benefit should be conditional on responsible conduct (Field, 2003).

Home Secretary David Blunkett's rhetorical calls for communities to 'take a stand' against anti-social behaviour are premised on the belief that social controls are essentially weak in deprived social housing estates. This has been linked to a decline in 'collective efficacy' required by local communities to establish and assert communal norms and values and informal social controls which discipline residents into towing the local line. The growing use of neighbourhood wardens and professional witnesses are responses to this perceived problem. Largely welcomed by residents, the wardens fill the informal social control gap where landlords and official agencies, like the police, are seen as inadequate or too disconnected from community life.

Commentators have often noted the apparent link between the poor physical environment, crime-inducing architecture of social housing estates and crime (Coleman, 1985; Newman, 1973). Multi-storey tower blocks with deck access, poor lighting, the lack of 'defensible space' arising from derelict communal areas with no apparent ownership and the lack of well-maintained public areas are well documented. Policy has sought to address this issue through the promotion of 'secure by design' properties incorporating security features and a focus on the provision of high-quality public spaces. The 'broken windows' hypothesis, claiming that neglected, initial signs of

neglect in an area can lead to a downward spiral of decay, has also been influential in approaches to vandalism and graffiti on housing estates and forms a key underpinning of the work of neighbourhood wardens. However, this has been interpreted as a community-based response to prevent escalation rather than an attempt to use a New York model of 'zero-tolerance' policing.

Areas of social housing are increasingly the sites of government interventions to tackle crime and disorder, reflected in the increasing role given to social landlords in multi-agency partnerships. These interventions are characterised by the strengthening of punitive measures such as eviction and anti-social behaviour orders and the emphasis on a visible presence. They are also, however, linked to more preventative measures, such as the use of mediation and intensive diversionary programmes working with vulnerable households.

The provision of good quality housing and neighbourhood services are now regarded as essential elements of wider social inclusion and anti-crime strategies which aim to counteract a range of problems appearing to stem from concentrated deprivation and mis-managed neighbourhoods. Such approaches also require placing crime and disorder in social housing areas in the context of wider social and economic forces impacting upon local neighbourhoods. For example, mismatches between skills and local employment and the relative accessibility of employment opportunities are all important

factors and it is not yet clear whether housing, crime and other social policies are sufficiently well integrated to achieve the gains required by a fearful and deprived social tenant population.

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References

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